



Ruel Smith

PERSONAL.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RUEL SMITH, OF BANGOR, ME.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE MONTHLY:

Dear Sir:—Your request that I should furnish, for the MONTHLY, a sketch of my life, so immediately following sketches of the lives of some of the most bright and shining lights in the reportorial profession, was not a little flattering to me; and while I still doubt that anything I can say of myself will be of interest to your readers, I am pleased to

comply, at least, so far as it may relate to my connection with the Stenographic art.

And since, as it seems, every good biographer-auto begin by putting out his *I's*; and in this case, as knowing very little about the subject of this sketch, it may be proper for me to borrow the editorial *we*. Therefore *ego*—a contraction for—here we go:—

We were born, (not twins) the seventh of nine children of Marshall Smith and Nancy Montgomery, at Boothbay, in the County of Lincoln, Maine, on the 10th day of October 1836. And as, from that time forward for several years, we kept no diary, much that might, if preserved, be of value to the world, must be reckoned with the lost arts.

Looking back over our early life, we can see some incidents, principally the mistakes and blunders of rather a dull boy, mention of which would add no spice to our biographical pie.

When about eighteen years of age we assumed the dignity of teacher; and during the Winter of 1854-5, taught our first school, numbering about seventy pupils from the A B C age up to the age of about forty sea-going summers and hibernating winters. Yes, about forty years of age, for we well remember one studious man who came to school this, and a subsequent winter, with his own children; and although not of legal age to draw school money, so good in deportment was he that we would gladly have welcomed more parents in exchange for their babes in the woods.

But this winter was mainly eventful from the fact that then commenced our struggles in the Stenographic art. The good old lady with whom we were boarding, one day presented us with Prof. Towndrow's "Complete Guide to the Art of Writing Shorthand," a book once the property of her son, a Universalist minister, then deceased.

The idea that we, from a book, might learn to take down with the rapidity of speech, the exact words of a speaker, was new to us, and it filled us with delight. We resolved at once to become a verbatim reporter, and immediately set about devouring the contents of that book, believing it to be the true and only way to reach the goal of our ambition. But after wading through and fixing in the mind all the arbitrary, unphonetic characters of that author, such as; a small circle (O) to represent "the world;" a dot placed within the circle, "in the world;" a dash touching the left side of the circle, (-O) "coming into the world;" touching the opposite side, (O-) "going out of the world;" the dash struck through the circle, "through the world;" a cross (X) representing the words Christ, Christian, Crucifixion and Cross—after months and months of such study and practice, we found that, practically, our time had all been wasted. After going through all the author's worlds of absurdity and taking up all his crosses, in about one year from the time we first saw it, we threw aside his book in disgust; for, about that time, a friend, the son of a near neighbor, had returned from a visit abroad, and brought with him "Webster's Exposition" of Isaac Pitman's Phonography, an examination of which first disclosed to us that there was a philosophical way of representing, by quick and easy strokes of the pen, every sound in the English language. Regretting much misspent time, we saw there was no other way but to take a new departure; but thinking there might still be something better, our past experience suggested further investigation. So we wrote to an elder brother, a lawyer in New-York City, then a member of the Board of Education, requesting him to see some practical reporter and ascertain for us what system was approved and adopted by professional reporters. With his reply we received Andrews & Boyle's instruction book, which was simply another mode of presenting Pitman's Phonography.

Now fairly started again, with the assurance of those who had successfully gone before, that we were on the right track, we made rapid progress in the new system, and in a surprisingly short time had learned everything about it that that little book could teach us. We then procured Benn Pitman's Manual and Reading Book and afterwards some of Isaac Pitman's works from England; and also subscribed for Benn Pitman's *Phonographic Magazine* and *Phonographic Reporter*, and Pitman & Prosser's periodicals, all the time striving, by the prescribed rules of practice, to reach anticipated results—climbing, then tumbling through discouragement at not coming up to the point promised in the books as a reward for not more than half the study and practice we had already brought to the work.

Having acquired the wonderful speed of about fifty words per minute, we undertook on one occasion—a sister reading to us—to give an exhibition of our skill in the presence of our paternal ancestor. The exhibition was evidently not very satisfactory to him, for he endeavored to persuade us that our time might be more profitably employed than in trying to attain impossibilities. Like that fond father, whose inability to appreciate his son's proficiency in his latin declensions and conjugations, led him to exclaim, "John, you take that forkibus and throw that manuribus into that cartibus or I'll break your backibus," he charged us to "fling away ambition." This, added to the already sufficient discouragement, gave our pencil a rest for a long time.

In the Spring of 1858 we went to Bangor, and in the office of the American Telegraph Company, about a stone's throw from where we are now writing, learned the art of telegraphing. Under the special instruction of a brother of many years experience and then manager of that office, we had in a few months, learned enough of the business to be intrusted with the management of a small office. We took with us to Bangor some of our phonographic text-books, but found very little opportunity to use them, our brother suggesting, quite early, that if they were committed to the flames our progress in telegraphy would be more marked. As an alternative, however, they were locked up in his desk, and in a few weeks he himself had caught the phonographic fever, calling on us occasionally for assistance while the fever was raging. We remember that about this time two very nice reporting covers were ordered by him, one of which, well worn in the service, now lies on the table before us.

For about two years we kept dotting and dashing at the telegraphic key, not wholly abandoning, however, our phonography; for an extract from a letter published in Benn Pitman's *Phonographic Magazine* for 1859, written while we were in charge of the telegraph office at Lawrence, Mass., to which our attention was recently called, reminds us that we were then teaching the art to others.

In the latter part of the winter of 1860, we went to New-York City and commenced to read law in the office of Albert Smith, the brother first above referred to. Here during two years of earnest endeavor to

fix in the mind as many as possible of those long and well settled, though sometimes intricate, head-aching and seeming contradictory principles of law, we found occasional recreation in the practice of Graham's "graceful stringlets"; for we had then made the acquaintance of "Standard Phonography," and paid our respects to its learned and skillful author.

While reading Blackstone's and Kent's Commentaries it was our general or frequent practice, after finishing a chapter, to close the book and write out in shorthand as much of it as we could remember, thereby better to fix in the mind what we had read and also gaining facility in writing.

In the Summer of 1862, we returned to Maine, and for a time re-joined the telegraph corps. McLellan was commanding at the front; but we were stationed at Eastport, on the extreme eastern border of Maine, and received our pay and rations from the American Telegraph Co., Gen. James S. Bedlow commanding our division; and we fought it out on that line while we remained in the service. It may not be uninteresting to stenographers, in this connection, to know that operators of the telegraph, as well as reporters, sometimes make mistakes of serious consequence; therefore we depart slightly from the text to relate an incident which caused some trouble to us.

One day, while at Eastport, a messenger from Fort Sullivan bro't to our office, to be transmitted over the wires, a message reading, substantially, as follows:—

"To the City Marshall of Portland, Me.

Sergeant ——— is on the way with a squad of men. Assist him on the arrival of the boat.

Signed ———,"

A few days after, the aforesaid sergeant appeared at our office, and greeted us with divers anathemas on the whole Telegraph Co.; for when he arrived in Portland, the Marshall was there with sufficient force to arrest him, and for a time, notwithstanding the protest of the sergeant, he was in doubt whether, in obedience to the telegram, to arrest or to afford the necessary assistance to keep the men, to whom large bounties had been paid, from skedaddling before they were lodged in camp.

This error may not seem so strange to those who know that in the Morse telegraphic alphabet, the letters R and S are both composed of three dots, the only difference between them being that in the former there is more space between the first and second dots than there is between the second and third; while in the latter the dots are equally spaced.

To this day, we have never been willing to admit that we were in fault for this error. It was the feller on the other end, who, without paying sufficient attention, took for granted that it was more the business of such an officer to *arrest* than to *assist*.

A similar error once occurred, in the early days of the telegraph, in relation to a note which was coming due at a bank, where the word *protect* was read *protest*, the letter C being also composed of three dots, but having more space between the second and third than between the first and second dots.

Tradition, also, tells us of a doting father away down in Maine, whose idolized, unmarried daughter, while visiting friends in the far West, was attacked by fever and ague. One Saturday night a telegram told the old man that his daughter "had a child this morning; but was now doing well." By the most rapid conveyance, the distracted father immediately proceeded westward; but when he reached his convalescent daughter and learned that a *child* could grow out of a *chill*, he was too happy to curse anybody.

In the Summer of 1863 we came back to Bangor and, as a law student, went into the office of Hon. John A. Peters, now one of Maine's most distinguished judges of the Supreme Judicial Court. Here, under favorable circumstances, we continued our legal studies till August 1864, when, at the adjourned April Term of Court, we were admitted to the Bar, and commenced the practice of law at Bangor where we had married, the winter before.

In all our varied pursuits, the fascination of the phonographic art has always clung to us; and this, more than anything else, has kept us in the practice of it; for reporters are not very well paid in Maine.

We did some reporting as far back as 1863, though we had not then reached the speed and facility of writing necessary for a reliable reporter, which, as every reporter knows, is best attained by frequent practice in following a good reader who will patiently graduate the reading to the ability of the writer to take it all down in good legible characters. Such a reader is not always at hand. Mrs. S. used, frequently, to aid us in this way, though it was an employment not well suited to her taste. After having, several times, gone over all those select pieces from "the end which the great Lord Bacon proposed to himself" clear through to the Humboldt end of Graham's reader, even those very interesting articles failed to interest her. One evening, when reading from Judge Nelson's charge in the dyeing-process patent suit, we requested her to go back a little and read over something she had already read, when she complimented our skill, something after this manner: "Why! I have had quite a long nap since I read *that*. A great many persons will have *died* before we get through dyeing."

Our first appointment in court under the law creating the office of Court Stenographer in Maine, was in 1867, having been called into court to report two or three important causes, our general business then being the practice of the law. Since the April Term 1869, when we received our first appointment for a full term, our general and almost exclusive business has been reporting for the courts in various counties throughout the State; and the piles of reports under the weight of which our shelves are now groaning, bear evidence of the immense amount of laborious work performed during the time.

As we sit here, looking on those piles, and considering what burdens of adjudicated wrongs; what a vast number of litigated acres; what a ponderous and crushing weight of horrid crimes those books contain, we almost wonder that they do not sink down through to the very foundation stones.